RFK killing spurs amateur sleuths

By DAVID HART
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The assassination of Robert F. Kennedy haunts Paul Schrade, who was just two steps away when the shooting started on June 5, 1968, in the Ambassador Hotel.

Schrade, one of Kennedy's advisers in the presidential campaign, was wounded in the head when the assassin, Sirhan Sirhan, opened fire. He has never been satisfied with the police version that Sirhan acted alone. Was there a second gunman? Was there a conspiracy?

Schrade has searched for the answers to his lingering questions in a collection of police photos, newspaper clippings, legal documents, even an X-ray of the bullet lodged in his skull.

Along with a handful of scholars, conspiracy buffs and freelance writers, Schrade is hoping to finally lay to rest his private investigation when Los Angeles police release their files on the case later this year.

Last week, the Los Angeles Police Commission agreed to release an edited version of the 1,500-page investigative summary. A sub-committee will be set up to study the disclosure of the remaining documents, some 50,000 pages stored in five file cabinets.

The night of the assassination, Kennedy thanked Schrade in his final speech at the Ambassador for helping to organize the labor vote. Schrade, now an American Civil Liberties Union organizer who lives in the Hollywood Hills, was then an executive with the United Auto Workers.

After the speech, Schrade followed Kennedy into the hotel kitchen where Sirhan waited. As the shooting started, Schrade said he remembers seeing stars, trembling violently and then blacking out. He fell just behind Kennedy. Reporters said among Kennedy's last words before lapsing into unconsciousness that night were: "Is Paul all right?"

"I was OK, but he wasn't," Schrade said. "And we lost a great champion and a good man."

The memory of Kennedy, the unfulfilled dreams and the promise of what might have been still drive Schrade and others who were inspired by Allard Lowenstein, the former New York congressman, to investigate the case on their own.

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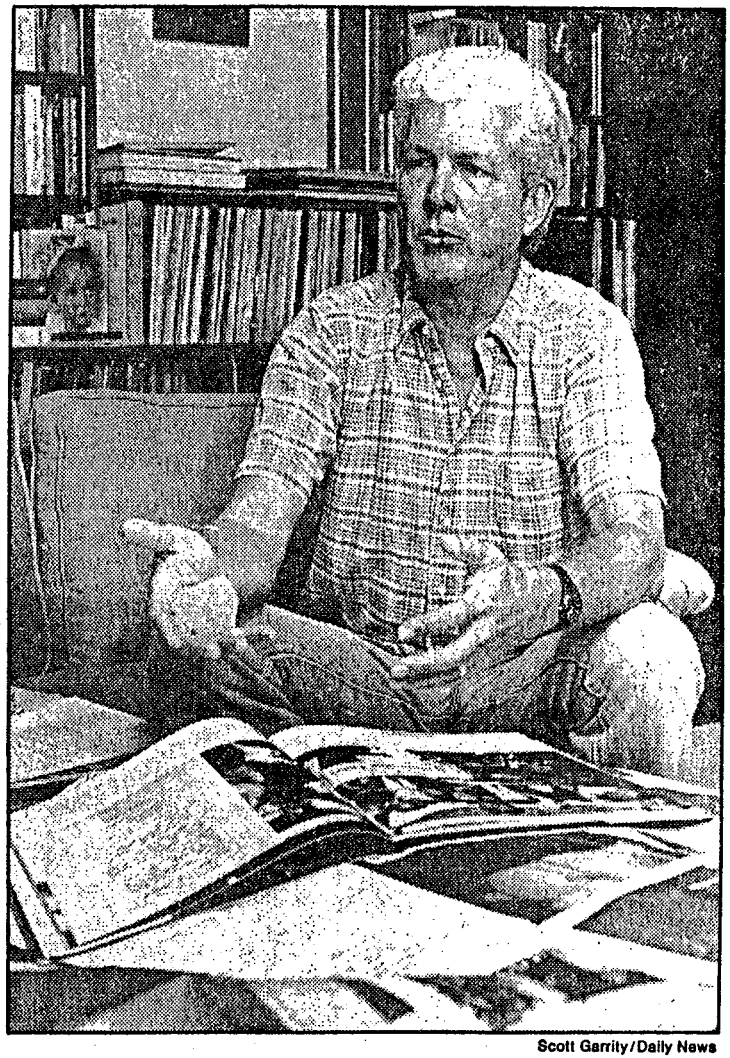

Scott Garrity/Daily News

Paul Schrade pursues his own investigation of the RFK assassination. He still carries in his head a bullet meant for Kennedy.

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Questions persist in RFK assassination

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Lowenstein — himself gunned down by an assassin in 1980 — suspected that a conspiracy was involved in Kennedy's death.

His attempts to find out what actually had happened were thwarted by the lack of public information available on the case, he said. There was so little information in fact, that Lowenstein's suspicions were aroused.

In 1977 he wrote: "I do not know whether Sirhan acting alone murdered Robert Kennedy. I do know what happened when we tried to find out. Eventually, reluctantly, against all my instincts and wishes, I arrived at the melancholy thought that people who have nothing to hide do not lie, cheat and smear to hide it."

At the time of the original investigation Los Angeles police looked into 17 separate conspiracy theories and concluded none of them amounted to anything. Still, the questions are endless and the theories numerous — ranging from the woman in the polka-dot dress who supposedly ran from the scene screaming "We've shot him," to the so-called "Manchurian Candidate" theory, which holds Sirhan was brainwashed into committing the crime.

The number of bullet holes reported would suggest that another gun was used. Who was the attractive woman that witnesses told police they saw with Sirhan before the shooting? How could Sirhan have shot Kennedy from 1 to 3 feet away, as witnesses said, if the autopsy showed some of the wounds were caused by a weapon fired from 1 to 3 inches away?

It seems certain that Sirhan shot and killed Kennedy at the hotel. There were numerous witnesses. Sirhan was apprehended at the scene and convicted of the killing. And Sirhan's lawyers conceded that he had fired the revolver that night.

But at the urging of Lowenstein, Schrade pursued five separate lawsuits in 1975 and 1976, seeking police information on the assassination. He won a court order to refire Sirhan's gun, but the ballistic results, according to Schrade, proved inconclusive.

Another person interested in the Kennedy case as a result of Lowenstein's influence is Robert Joling, a forensic scientist from Wisconsin.

Joling said he was first approached by Lowenstein in 1975 about the case and couldn't say no. "He was very bright, and you couldn't help but admire him," Joling said. "He had a certain charisma that all good politicans have and the rest of us wish we did."

At the time, Joling was president of the American Academy of Forensic Scientists. Soon he became convinced that there was more to the assassination than the police version. Over the years, he has spent, by his own estimation, $35,000 researching the question.

Joling was instrumental in winning the court order in 1975 to refire Sirhan's gun. And in 1981, he analyzed three audio tapes of the shooting at the Stanford Research Institute, concluding that 10 shots were fired that night. Sirhan's gun was an eight-shot revolver.

And now, with the impending release of new police information about the case, Joling's interest has been renewed. At the age of 60, Joling now looks on solving the assassination case as his hobby.

"It is like a jigsaw puzzle that you have been putting off for years," he said. "I would like to devote my remaining years to a pastime that is fun. It is a personal challenge."

It's the legacy of Lowenstein that also drives Greg Stone, a one-time aide, campaign coordinator and speech writer for the liberal Democrat from New York. Stone also edited a collection of Lowenstein's articles and speeches published in 1983 entitled "Act of Courage and Belief."

Stone first researched the Kennedy case in 1975 because he was on Lowenstein's staff. But soon the project became a personal cause for Stone. Lowenstein's questions became Stone's questions.

After Lowenstein was shot to death by a former aide, Stone continued on.

"After all, part of what a great leader does is not to just do good things, but also inspire other people to do good things," Stone said.

Another person interested in seeing the Los Angeles police documents is Jack Kimbrough, a self-described free-lance writer for a Hollywood tabloid.

"We're talking about a cover-up," Kimbrough said as he waved enlarged evidence photos at police commission members last week. "There were 13 shots from an eight-shot revolver. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."